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*THE CRITICAL PROBLEM OF THEOLOGY TODAY:  
THE PROBLEM OF METHOD*

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I

Systematic Theology used to be the acknowledged Queen of the Sciences, exacting allegiance and tribute in every district of human thought. By one of those cataclysmic upheavals of thought that now and then disturb society, the situation has been radically altered. The queen has been dethroned. Surveying this wrecked glory and these emblems of departed power, the faithful speak of a rebellion; the philosopher thinks of it as a revolution; the man of science calls it evolution.

Traditionalist, philosopher, or scientist, we all know that the present situation is enigmatical. So far as systematic theology is concerned, "there hath passed away a glory from the earth." What is the significance of the changing order? There are differing degrees and kinds of glory. Has theology passed its zenith with the glory that has failed? Or is the present situation but a temporary eclipse? Are we to mount higher in the scale of glory when we emerge from the shadow cast by the ascendant star of science?

More concretely said, the coming of an age of science, with its new way of regarding the world, its new methods of explanation, its new spirit of independence and power, its new ideals of life, has disturbed the old order. The upheaval has been profound, and the presuppositions upon which traditional theology built its fortresses are today largely discredited or under suspicion. The result is seen and felt in far-reaching confusion in the realm of religious explanation, and in the universal effort at adjustment. Since theology and religion reciprocally influence each other, the result has been a wave of uncertainty or depression in the field of practical religion. The appeal of the Christian ministry for young men of ambition has waned; the authority of the pulpit

has suffered; the hold of the church upon society has weakened, —with the result of a vacillating moral and religious consciousness. Robust ethics and conquering ideals are achieved in the atmosphere of confidence and conviction. An age of hesitation and confusion in the things of the spirit does not best minister to moral fibre and world-defying, world-conquering confidence. This general estimate of the present situation as having its roots, partly at least, in the confusion of religious explanation, will serve as a practical apology for offering an analytical discussion of the state of Systematic Theology.

If there were space for it, the situation might be made much clearer by an historical review of the rise, rule, and decline of systematic theology, with a study of the causes for the decline. We may safely start, however, with the assumption that the fortunes of theology are at low-ebb tide today, and with the other assumption, which I think the whole history justifies, namely, that the weakness of the situation, the cause of the decline, lies in the inadequate conception of the task and method of theology which controls the makers of theology. If we can set ourselves right here, gaining a somewhat definite and tenable conception of our task, we shall be prepared for fruitful work in theology. For fallacious conceptions and, above all, confused conceptions of our task are current in theological circles today. The confusion of the theologian is reflected in some form in the whole Christian church.

In speaking of art and artists, John Ruskin observes that "failure is less frequently attributable to either insufficiency of means or impatience of labor, than to a confused understanding of the thing actually to be done."<sup>1</sup> A confused understanding of the thing to be done! That is the key to the present Babel of opinions. What are we trying to do? What is our task, and what are its limitations; and what the best method of approaching our task? Sabatier says, "To the thinking man a discord between methods is a graver matter than an opposition between doctrines."<sup>2</sup> The insight of that pregnant sentence ought to be

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to the Seven Lamps of Architecture.

<sup>2</sup> The opening sentence of his book, *The Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit*.

the possession of every theological thinker. The discord between theologies today, the discord between science and theology, between traditional theology and modern theology, the discord of the church trying to find its strength, of the individual trying to recover his faith,—what is it but the discord of method, the discord of confused conceptions of what we are trying to do? It may be that the theological battle will continue; but even so let us stop the petty guerilla warfare about petty things and fight in the open for our deepest insights, out of which are the issues of life.

The seriousness of the discord of method lies in the fact that the debate is not carried on at the point of fundamental disagreement.<sup>3</sup> The real difference between the disputants may be the irreconcilable differences of clashing philosophies and of fundamental conceptions of method. The opposing champions may be controlled by presuppositions which are mutually antagonistic and which do not appear in the debate. Neither party suspects the nature of the disagreement, nor the place of control. Most doctrinal debates are of this sort, and the present struggle exhibits this blindness to the real issue. Sharp rapier-thrusts and brilliant defences are futile to settle such disputes, even though one party to the encounter may give way. For the issue is between fundamentals, and all parties engaged must see the issues involved and the fundamental point of disagreement; else the crossing of swords is useless, wasteful, and bombastic. To be sure, seeing the issue is not necessarily healing the breach. But it is much to know just where and why the conflict is, even though we agree to disagree. Concrete problems must be subordinated to a study of principles. The debate then becomes rational rather than verbal. Some of the showiest debates in the history of theology have been insoluble in the terms of their formulation; but they belonged in the Theory of Knowledge, where the value of the discordant methods could have been rationally determined,

<sup>3</sup> In an analytical discussion of "The Old Theology and the New," in the *Harvard Theological Review*, January, 1911, which has appeared since this article was prepared, Professor William Adams Brown makes a similar emphasis. "All turns here on the term 'method.' The new theology is not a matter of date, but of principles."

and the true issue seen. A change of venue should have been ordered, a new tribunal. For only a better analysis of the problem of knowledge could have cleared the rational atmosphere.

The true theological issue today—the real ground of confusion—is in the matter of rational method. Recent literature is recognizing this fact, and it is a hopeful sign of the times. A significant example of this is a symposium, in a recent theological journal, by three leading theological professors, dealing with the theme, “The Task and Method of Systematic Theology.”<sup>4</sup> Such essays will help constructive thinkers to clarify their own visions of truth and to formulate their convictions.

## II

The greatest sense of discord today in the theological field is that expressed in the distinction between the traditional orthodox wing of the church on the one hand, and the modern orthodox wing on the other. By these terms are meant the older and the newer movements within the field of Christian interpretation. The main battle is in process here, and the chief confusion arises somewhere on the line where these two movements collide. It is not sufficient to brush this distinction lightly aside with the assumption that it is only a phase of the perennial clash between the conservative and the radical forces of thought. This is not wholly true; moreover, it is not specific enough. There is something distinctive about the present situation. What is the real principle of discord between traditional theology and modern theology,<sup>5</sup>—these terms being used to designate the general type of theological formulation which we have inherited from the past and the general type of protest and reconstruction current today?

<sup>4</sup> American Journal of Theology, April, 1910. The contributors to the symposium were Professor Benjamin B. Warfield of Princeton Seminary, Professor Wm. Adams Brown of Union Seminary, and Professor Gerald Birney Smith of the University of Chicago.

<sup>5</sup> Faithful critics have pointed out that this use of the words “modern” and “traditional” to designate the contrasted types of theological method is ambiguous. But any words are open to like criticism; and the carefully restricted definition here given to the terms ought to render them innocuous, and fairly adequate.

The comprehensive answer is that it is a fundamental "discord between methods," and not an "opposition between doctrines." More specifically said, it is the discord between the static conception of life and the world which has prevailed until far into the nineteenth century, and an evolutionary or growing conception of life and the world which holds our minds today and pervades every field of our thinking. The units of the older world of thought were conceived in rigid and fixed terms. The units of our modern thinking are elastic, growing things. The older philosophic ideal was Being; the modern philosophic ideal is Becoming.<sup>6</sup> The older scientific ideal was unchangeable essence; the modern scientific ideal is development as the essential nature of things. The older conception of method moved in terms of absolutes; the modern conception of method deals with relative standards.

This abstract statement of a fundamental discord of method finds concrete exemplification in every line of inquiry. For the technical student of thought it is doubtless sufficient to say that the difference that we have characterized is the difference which the discovery of the evolutionary conception and its application to life has wrought. Darwin<sup>7</sup> is the father of this discord. Profoundly interpreted, evolution is indeed the key to our problem; but not evolution as popularly conceived, nor evolution as an hypothesis of natural science, nor, least of all, as a philosophical dogma. Evolution as a statement of that whole radical transformation of our method of thinking which marks the emergence of modern thought is indeed the key to our total problem. But the term is likely to be only a verbal explanation, or to offer only a shallow interpretation. It is necessary therefore to characterize the far-reaching implications of the evolutionary method as a new insight into meaning, a new and pregnant principle with which thought operates in every realm.

<sup>6</sup> This relativity is not the "absolute relativity" of the Hegelian "becoming is the truth of being." It is not a metaphysical doctrine at all, but the recognition that we know phenomena as process. Our explanations must take account of the omnipresent fact of finite development, whatever our conception of the absolute.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Henry Jones, *Idealism as a Practical Creed*, pp. 24 f.

The key to the true understanding of the modern world of thought is in the hand of the man who has mastered the meaning of law, process, growth. In the field of natural science, the biological method has yielded immense fruit. The law of life is growth. Everything that lives, grows. In the field of organic life, the application of the principle is fairly clear. We study a plant or a tree in terms of its law of development. Likewise with animal life, we are concerned with the laws of growth. This is perfectly clear when applied to the individual. But natural science has carried with fruitfulness the application of the principle of growth to the groups of individuals. Our classifications into groups and species express not fixity, but development.

In the inorganic world, science is controlled by similar ideals. Geology discovers that the world itself has developed and is developing. Astronomy affirms not only a moving world, but age-long, advancing processes everywhere. This is a growing universe. The old rigidity and finality are dispelled.

But the real significance of the newer insight is not seen until the method is applied to the study of man. Man's world is a growing thing; and man himself, studied as an individual or in groups or as a genus, expresses development and not fixity. Anthropology, psychology, sociology, all deal with elastic, moving facts, not with static facts. And thus this principle of insight is brought to a man's moral world, his religious world, his rational world, and under the scrutiny of this newer method it is all seen as a moving, advancing process. Religion, whether in the race or in the individual, grows from the zero point to its best estate by a progressive process. The moral life awakens and grows from more to more. And even rationality, intelligence, thought, is everywhere an advancing fact, not a constant quantity. The effort to fix this complex, moving fact by a name, as "human nature," is delusive. We conceal the movement thus under a mental conception that seems to form a fixed point in the flux. The older, abstract units of thought about man, such as "moral agent," "responsibility," "freedom," "religion," are all seen to have fluent rather than fixed meanings in their practical application. None of these things are constant quantities, but growing. We must learn to think not only a man's objective

world, but also his subjective world,—his units of thought and the thinker himself,—as moving, growing facts, expressing a process proceeding by inviolable laws.

All of this is indeed bewildering and confusing for the lay mind, especially when viewed on the background of the old, secure, and fixed units of thought. The fountains of the great deep are broken up, and chaos seems to threaten. But the real significance for theology of this changed method is likely to be misapprehended. It is a shallow view which assumes that the real trouble with the evolutionary principle in theology is that it makes creation always a process as against the fiat-conception of Genesis. That science affirms our world and all worlds to have been evolved, while the Bible says that God created them; or that science affirms the evolution of man, while Genesis declares that God placed him ready-made in a ready-made world, this is only the fringe of the problem and really does not touch its implications. It is the thorough-going antithesis of the modern sense of the relativity of meanings to the older sense of the absoluteness of meanings which makes the situation acute. Neither party can clearly comprehend the other. It is an "irrepressible conflict" between two irreconcilable orders of thought; and to debate about doctrines across the dividing line without comprehending the underlying principle of disharmony, can only result in words, bad blood, confusion, and distrust. Confident, positive, constructive work in theology can proceed only upon a clear grasp of the situation and a deliberate adoption of the principle which actually underlies our own world of thought. Thus only can we find a real point of contact between our theology and the thinking of the people. In the present twilight-stage of the great debate many preachers and theologians simply share the confusion of their hearers, and get on by the amphibious method of breathing both atmospheres. The result is an anaemic theology, by reason of the imperfect adjustment to the old or the new. At best it is a *modus vivendi*, and theology must eventually either die or adjust itself to its environment.

Concrete illustrations of this discord between methods are familiar to all who touch the field of theology. They occur at every stage and phase of the work. The traditional theology,



formulated in the spirit of a static interpretation, protests against change. Her formulations are canonized and sacred. Modern theology says that the very life and efficiency of theology is in adjustment to the changing demands of life and of thought. Traditional theology conceives the Bible as a final message to the world. Modern theology regards the Bible as the faithful record of a growing and endless message. Traditional theology conceives the Bible as "inerrant" or "infallible," and reluctantly admits the function of criticism. Modern theology conceives the Bible as the richest of many sources of practical guidance, and welcomes all the light of research. Traditional theology regards revelation as a constant quantity, an *absolutum*, either coextensive with the Bible or contained therein. The business of exegete and expositor is to discover and construe this absolute content. Modern theology conceives revelation simply as what is actually revealed of God, and testifies to the supreme revealing power of the Biblical record. Again, in the matter of truth or doctrine traditional theology regards the Bible as the "documented revelation of God to man," and the task of theology is "the ascertainment, formulation, and systematization of the truth thus communicated." Modern theology, on the other hand, seeks no such absolute *quantum* which it can formulate and systematize. It gladly finds its material in the whole spiritual realm, so richly illuminated by the Bible, and offers it for religious guidance. And the truths with which it deals—its explanations—must not be identified with fixed doctrines, but must be studied in their roots and in all the stages of their growth. Traditional theology regards Jesus as the oracle whose recorded word is the touchstone of theology. Hence the proof-text method prevails. Modern theology regards Jesus as personality, the spirit of truth, whose spirit—whose outlook on the spiritual—is indeed the test of all theology. But texts must be subordinated to the spirit that speaks through them. Literalism gives place to true spiritualism. In a word, traditional theology moves in a world of absolute conceptions, searching an absolute Bible for an absolute revelation. And its ideal is an absolutely valid and permanent theology. Modern theology conceives its task in utterly different spirit. Theology is an ever-growing science searching

for all records of God's ways with men, all revelations of the Holy Spirit in experience and history. And it seeks so to interpret this revelation for every age and every man that it shall come with the freshness and force of God's word. Christianity, the gospel, Christ, are constant quantities of the traditional theology to be brought as saving facts to that other constant fact, the sinner. Christianity, the gospel, Christ, the sinner, these are all facts for modern theology; but they are facts which grow and expand and vary in endless adjustment to the wondrous growing spirit of men in every age and at every stage of development.

We may further draw out the essential contrast of spirit and method in terms of the following antitheses.

The traditional method starts with a body of truth accepted as absolute, and proceeds deductively. The modern method starts with experience and history, and proceeds inductively. Apriorism is the key to traditionalism. Empiricism is the key to the modern method. According to the traditional method the Bible, or some revelation contained in the Bible, constitutes an unchanging standard of theological truth. For the modern method the Bible, and its teaching so far as we can apprehend it, are not finalities, but registers of human experience and conviction. For traditional theology, revelation has to do with statements. For modern theology, revelation has to do with insight, meanings. Traditional method assumes the possibility of eternal patterns for conduct,—moral finalities, ever valid. Modern method affirms eternal principles and ideals of conduct which yield guidance through interpretation rather than by mechanical application. The modern method regards traditional theology as "standpatism" in religion. The latter regards modern method as "insurgency." The traditional method calls the moderns lawless, and disloyal to the true standards, while the latter profess to be moved by a great moral awakening. For they scornfully decline to take advantage of "half-fare permits to the clergy" in theological thinking. The scientific spirit has pointed out the essential dishonesty of claiming rational exemptions or privileges for theologians. No marvel or miracle must be made to do service for integrity in thinking. The scientific conception

of inviolable law has tended to moralize and tone up modern theological method.

Traditional theology has held aloof from the other sciences and has grudgingly conceded their advance, feeling that many scientific discoveries were inimical to religion. Consistent with its presupposition of a unique, absolute standard of truth, traditional theology has felt obliged to defend her dogmas, and has only reluctantly yielded at certain points where scientific criticism has compelled it. Volumes upon volumes are written whose burden is this: "Even though we have been routed from our ancient stronghold, scientific method cannot reach this new citadel of faith. Here is a reserved district where criticism cannot enter!" Thus miracles are a strong bulwark of traditional theology, for the reason that they are inexplicable. Modern method, on the other hand, has joined hands with every scientific spirit and has been eager for light from every quarter. For the modern method has essayed to put theology upon a common basis with every other true science, in that it shall be empirical, inductive, and fearlessly face the truth. It says that history, experience, and reason will sufficiently sift and protect religious truth. Let us know the facts, and they will be our best revelation of truth! It only asks for a proper limitation of its field, and for tests of truth appropriate to its subject-matter.

Thus, while traditional method is occupied largely with defences and with justifying the old standards, modern method is studying how to make real to men of today the vital message of Christianity. Consistency and system is the central aim of the one; reality and effectiveness is the aim of the other.

To the traditional method, a divine revelation is like Melchizedek, without pedigree or descent: to the modern method, revelation is like a well-born child, rich in ancestry and potential of unborn truth. For the one, discontinuity is the mark of divine revelation: for the other, continuity is a test of truth. It follows that traditional method commonly insists upon the distinction between the natural and the supernatural order,—the secular and the religious. The modern method in theology either obliterates this distinction or gives the terms new significance.

The security and certainty of the traditional method is in the

assumption of a fixed standard to which every teaching is brought to be measured. The security and certainty of the modern method lies in the absence of any such arbitrary standards, since the soul can be trusted to discover and obey the laws of its own being. Even religious truths lie open to our understanding. Freedom of thought is the test of modern orthodoxy. Therefore the method of authority which is the ruling ideal of traditional theology cannot be retained entire or in part by one who frankly concedes the truth of the modern ideal. The incompatibility is complete at this point. It is about the ideal of authority that the traditional movement is rallying its forces, and it is here that the modern movement is leading the fiercest attacks. There is no compromise possible. It is a war to the death.

In a final word, the modern method in theology squarely faces the evolutionary method of regarding life and the world, and thus puts itself squarely on a footing with all other true sciences. In so doing it disregards the old-time demand for absolute standards or absolute proofs. In place of the older, fixed standards it trusts the veracity of the mind's nature in the form of rational principles of insight; and in place of absolute proofs it submits its formulations to the verification of experience. In this spirit it essays to minister to the human heart in the whole range of its need in terms of the law of its life and its growth.

And now when the issue is squarely seen and felt between the modern method and the traditional, together with its epochal significance for theology, many a thoughtful and reverent student gasps out this inquiry: "But if there are no absolute standards of truth, no absolute proofs,—no infallibles or *absoluta* in our approach to the Bible and Christianity,—how can we be absolutely certain of the line between the true and the false in religious explanation?" The question wrings the soul of the teacher who knows sympathetically the mind of his pupil. It is sufficient here to say that the inquiry really begs the question. The "absolute certainty," in the sense meant, has disappeared, with the other absolutes of the older method. With all other true sciences we fall back upon the tests of intelligence and the verification of experience. Independent "proofs" we have none. Are we "absolutely certain" of our conclusions in chemistry or in ethics? The

question is academic. Practically, we can affirm no such infallible standard. But the seeking heart finds its confident way to God, and the seeking understanding finds its confident way to truth, without this external compulsion. "For certainty in concrete things is a matter of life rather than of speculation."<sup>8</sup>

In view of the instinctive protest that arises here from those who feel that this is dismissing the whole matter of truth with an airy wave of the hand, or at least making it a purely subjective and relative matter, we would earnestly point out that this apprehension arises from false inference as to the consequences of method. The earth is as real and solid since we have discovered that it whirls in space and is among the smallest of an infinite universe of worlds, as it was when people regarded it as "fixed" and flat and lonely. Neither does the atomic theory, nor the theory of electrons, undermine our confidence in the stability of things. Movement does not affect the essential stability of things, —but only interprets that stability. So in religious explanation, we need only to note the actual stability of the realities involved and adjust our preconceived conceptions to the newer insight.

Those who feel that subjectivity and uncertainty await those who apply the evolutionary insight to religious problems suffer needless alarm. This is to misunderstand the place and method of application of the modern principle of relativity. There are not only abiding historical facts but there are abiding ideals and principles of intelligence which constitute the fixities of our human knowing. Jesus Christ abides forever, the same in his character and spirit and outlook on the spiritual. Religious experience and rational principles of truth,—these are inalienable possessions, even though we face the self-evident fact that both religion and rationality are growing quantities. We manage our religious problems in terms of these abiding meanings. Christ, experience, the moral reason, are precious possessions by which we can always determine our religious latitude and longitude, and direct our thinking toward the right goal.

Moreover, the tacit assumption of the protest that we must

<sup>8</sup> Borden P. Bowne, *Essence of Religion*, p. 65. This was always a fundamental principle with this master thinker; and it is, indeed, an illuminating insight of much modern philosophy.

have "external standards" means the demand for some past, fixed standards to which we can look. This means distrust of our actual guiding standards today. What is this but distrust of the guidance of the Holy Spirit today, in our worship of the past? What is it but the denial of the living Christ of present experience, in our worship of the figure of history, nineteen hundred years away? This is the real heresy of religion!

"Thrice ingrate he whose only look  
Is backward,—focussed on a Book,—  
Neglectful what the Presence saith,  
Though He be near as blood and breath."

There is spiritual rebuke in the insight of the newer method, rich insights into the possibilities of faith, as we cast ourselves on the truth and face the fact that God worketh hitherto, and worketh still, in his own way. The modern preacher who masters the modern meanings of life and the world has his unique and responsible opportunity to bring to men the consciousness of a living God co-working with men today. The preacher's method of interpretation becomes his instrument to save men.

And in any case we cannot restore the Ptolemaic conception of the human world as static. Our world of mind and morals and religion "does move,"—though it is controlled by laws as faithful and abiding as God himself! Our security, like that of all legitimate explanation, rests upon the assumption that this is an "honest world." Theology assumes the veracity of the religious world, though it cannot "prove" its right to its assumption.

### III

Turning now from the consideration of this fundamental discord, which we regard as the real crux of the present confusion and ferment, we call attention to some more general issues which involve confusion.

Any really consistent and fruitful thinking is controlled by a view of the world which involves certain presuppositions, a certain large view of the meaning of life, and a corresponding ideal of philosophic method. Thus the great philosophies fall into

distinct types according to these presuppositions of method upon which they rest. For freedom in philosophic thinking can only mean freedom to be absolutely faithful to controlling principles. "Freedom of thought," in the sense of lawless or unprincipled thinking, is unreason. Now it follows that certain types of philosophic method, proceeding from presuppositions which are inimical to religion itself, are valueless or confusing when applied to religious problems. For example, an avowed atheistic philosophy of life could not consistently expound religion based upon theism. There are many present-day currents of thought which are implicitly materialistic, atheistic, or thoroughly agnostic of religious values. When a man controlled by such a philosophy enters the field of theology, whether as exegete, expositor, or systematic formulator of theology, his findings have a qualified value. They must always be estimated upon the background of the theorist's implicit assumptions. Christianity is not consistent with any and all philosophies, and the failure to discern this truth has produced a great number of bizarre and valueless volumes of so-called "scientific" treatment of the Bible and of Christianity. If thinking is to be consequent, it must be consistent; and there is no such thing as a disinterested or colorless attitude in philosophy. The thinker is always committed to something, and his thinking will have this element of relativity. Even philosophy must give an account of itself, for if it is not watched, it will make the worse appear the better reason. So in the matter of theological method in general, we earnestly insist that the work of exegetes and theologians shall be examined in their fundamental, controlling principles and not in their surface-utterances. Some very keen and able men are disqualified for the work under consideration. To see this clearly will be to eliminate some of the confusion from theology.

We can do no more here than point out some of the currents of thought which neutralize the value of religious explanation when they are in control, for the reason that they carry assumptions which undermine the values to which religion is committed.

1. First of all there is a false naturalism that sometimes busies itself with religious problems. Naturalism is the type of philosophy, based upon the analogy of the method of natural science,

which explains all things in terms of genesis and process. It "functions" so easily with the social consciousness of today that it is capable of easy perversion. It might be characterized as the anatomical study of personal and social phenomena. This naturalistic study of phenomena in terms of beginnings and processes does bring us a great insight. But the danger is in a false naturalism which says, in effect, that explanation in terms of process is the full account of things. Anatomy is the last word. This attitude is familiar to students in the field of religion, but it is a barren attitude, for it stops short of those meanings and values of religion which give it worth and warmth and power. The anatomy of religion it is useful to know; but it is the flesh and blood and spirit of living religion which ultimately commend it to men. Theorists of this sort are writing books upon religion today which are hailed as "scientific"; and they are indeed scientific in the sense that they are modelled after the methods of natural science. They are unscientific in the sense that they have not correlated their method to their task, nor adopted tests of truth that bring them into first-hand contact with their data. They always deal with a corpse, and their keen dissection never discovers the actual life that commands religion. Naturalism describes the body of religion, but overlooks its living soul.<sup>9</sup>

2. Then there is a current form of abstract idealism in philosophy which perpetuates the myopic vision of the old rationalism and treats all problems in a transcendental spirit. Many of the religious fads of our day are examples of this type of treatment. Caring more for the articulations of abstract speculation than for the articulations of life, explanations of this type often deal in airy but pretentious styles of philosophic architecture which appeal to the pride of the half-educated. The weakness of this type of philosophy is that the demands of life and experience are overlooked in the abstract and vague effort to reach some supposed logical demand. Moral distinctions are levelled, and the moral reason is stultified. The thread of reality is snapped when religion commits itself to these abstractions; and the

<sup>9</sup> The fault to be criticised in this type of thinking is not that it is not true, but that it does not exhaust the meanings and function of explanation, nor even touch our fundamental religious questionings.



earnestness and concrete devotion to actual life which characterize religion at its best are thus lost. Explanations offered in this spirit are likely to be insensible to the values of human life, and thus of life's supreme distinction,—religion!

3. There is a curious blending of the method of naturalism and the method of abstract idealism in a popular exegetical or historical movement widely current today. It is a method often rather unjustly identified with the Ritschlian method in theology. This is the attempt to "explain" a doctrine or a man or a movement by a process of analysis which ultimately brings the object sought to the vanishing point. Under the guise of pursuing an "historical method" it makes abstract idealism its directive principle, and by a process of refinement, of casting out everything that can be "accounted for" by the laws of development, it essays to reach a sediment, an "irreducible minimum" of truth with which it can operate. We are familiar with the attempt to find in this way the "real Christ" and the "essence of Christianity." The result is likely to be a vacuous or vaporous thing without form, comeliness, or function. Explainers of this type offer us as the ghostly residuum of their reduction an "essential Christ" or an "essential Gospel," which neither informs nor inspires. In the task of discriminating essentials from non-essentials, theological analysis must understand the limitations of method as instrumental and not as tyrannical.

4. Again, there is a movement of thought that expresses an overdone principle of empiricism. Pragmatism expresses the psychological emphasis of the age. But an excessive pragmatism, which renounces all ideal values and makes the test of truth to be merely the demands of the hour, is likely to overlook all the forces that stand above actual life and command it. Thought itself becomes an invertebrate, molluscous thing when it thus repeats the old positivism<sup>10</sup> and makes the actual order the measure of truth. The old rationalistic trust in the logical reason was excessive; but the excessive pragmatic reaction ignores a great guiding principle of the mind's nature, namely, its active power to control life from the point of view of its own

<sup>10</sup> This seems to be the pervasive weakness of Professor Gerald Birney Smith's otherwise admirable discussion in the Symposium cited above (note 3).

ideal; its power to look ahead and forecast the truth in terms of principles that abide through changing doctrines. Mind is dynamic and creative; not merely a passive reflection of logical relations. An excessive empiricism is supine before the problem of life. It does not adequately function with the fact that religion is a conquering power to overcome the world. A true pragmatism must and does adjust itself to this prime fact of religious life.

Thus we might attempt to pick out the philosophic currents and cross-currents which go to make up the mental world of a given age, and we might profitably attempt to distinguish currents from the tidal movements in which all men seem to think together. We make here this partial analysis not in the interest of a thorough-going criticism or condemnation; we only point out that *a philosophic method which is sceptical or agnostic at its roots, or in its fundamental principles, must inevitably repeat its scepticisms in its formulated account of life and religion.* So far to transcend differences of method as justly to estimate them all in their limitations as well as in their fruitfulness, is the real goal of philosophic insight. Only as a theologian measurably attains to this power of rowing against currents can he be other than the helpless victim of a prevailing current or "Zeitgeist." It becomes profitable unto all things rational for a theological student thus to understand the rationale of the movements of thought that control him, and thus to be able discriminatingly to assess the value of his own logic and his own conclusions. Only thus can he transcend the confusion, the scepticism, the helpless uncertainty of the theological atmosphere of his age, by understanding these things in their causes.

#### IV

A brief sketch of some of the more important positive constructive principles must complete our essay toward theological method.

First,—theology and religion must not be treated as identical terms. Religion is the great human fact that expresses the

soul's life illuminated and controlled by the vision of the divine. Theology is the mind's interpretation of this prime fact of life. Theology thus becomes instrumental and secondary to religion.

Secondly,—as a human fact, religion is not a constant quantity in any save a conceptual sense. It is a growing fact, responsive to the whole complex, growing life of a man. Theology, the intellectual interpretation of religion, must not only take account of this incessant movement of the human spirit in its response to its vision of God, but itself, as our thought about religion, is subject to the laws of thought. This inevitably means that there will be change, growth, development, in our interpretation of religion. Theology cannot be a constant quantity to be handed out to succeeding generations of thinkers; but in a living race or a living man it outgrows all arbitrary standards.

Thirdly,—the historical study of doctrine thus becomes a first principle of theological method. Every Christian doctrine must be interpreted in the light of its history. The real meaning of the doctrine must have regard not only for its origin but for its development and goal. Jesus exemplified this principle in his demand for "fulfilment" of inherited truths.

We must recognize that the ruling conceptions of any age—its science, its philosophy, and its whole outlook upon life—are inevitably reflected in its thinking and shape its doctrinal interpretations. As these conceptions grow or change from age to age with the growth of society, we must learn to discriminate between the abiding truth of a doctrine and its form in any age. Thus the great creeds and symbols of the church become landmarks, monuments, rich revelations of truth to guide us. But a creed or a doctrinal statement cannot permanently become a fixed standard. It is a witness to a spiritual reality; not the living reality itself.

On the other hand, this principle of relativity has some vital consequences for the shaping of an authoritative theology for today. Our accepted conceptions of the world must find sympathetic understanding in the terms of our theological thought. For our own "ruling conceptions" must be the vehicles of the spiritual message to us. Anachronisms may not be untrue,

but they are inadequate to produce conviction. Thus such conceptions as law, development, immanence, socialism, and the like must be the Spirit's instruments to us. Hence the theologian must know the "social consciousness" of his own times as well as of past ages.

Fourthly,—this principle of growth and development must be applied to the Biblical record precisely as to any other record of human experience. The scholar has the same rights of investigation and criticism in the Biblical record as in any other. We may not canonize any standard as an *absolutum* of truth. Thus considered, the Bible, with its precious record of God's life manifested in the experiences of men and nations and its record of God in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, becomes our richest source of knowledge of the Christian religion, and our most fruitful source of directive principles for the guidance of life and thought. Considered thus, the Bible is not less essential to the work of a theologian, though it serves a somewhat different function. It becomes not so much an object of study as a means of study. For each Biblical writer is no longer a lonely oracle of revelation, but a fellow-student of the divine revelation. Nowhere are the respective angles of approach of the traditional and the modern student more radically contrasted than here. The inspiration of this latter view of the Bible, once apprehended, will be an immense incentive to vital thinking and vital religion.

Fifthly,—the contention for an "infallible rule of faith" which characterized the traditional demand for a directive standard in theology we must metamorphose into the forms of verification or tests of truth recognized by modern thinking. The synthesis of experience, history, and reason forms the tribunal where our certainties are tested. Thus theology takes its place among the sciences. It is no truer than they; but it is as true, and the theologian's passion for truth is met and satisfied in the same way. Truth lies in the maintaining of balance in the application of our tests of truth. An over-emphasis upon experience results in mysticism; an over-emphasis upon history results in a false naturalism; an over-emphasis upon reason results in rationalism. Each expresses an excess.

If an age of overgrown rationalism neglected to supplement the guidance of reason by an appeal to experience, it would seem that the excessive empiricism of our day needs to see the abiding truth of rationalism. History and experience must not be studied as merely inarticulate, successive phases of the flow of life. Reason expresses the fact that intelligence brings its own nature to the problem, and that nature is constructive and normative in its knowledge rather than passively reflective. The principle of continuity is rational as well as temporal; logical as well as successive. Thus the phases of history and experience are to be studied in their relation to the logical as well as the practical demands of life. Theology is controlled by rational necessities as well as empirical. Theology must be understood in its rational unfolding as well as in its historical. There is a true apriorism that must guide all wholesome empiricism. A theology which commands assent in any age must "function" with the logical reason as well as with practical needs.

Sixthly,—one consequence of a better analysis of religion is the disentanglement of essentials from non-essentials. This brings the clearer insight that the august fact of religion moves in the realm of moral relations. On the one hand, this insight is reflected in a modern effort to eliminate metaphysical considerations from theology. On the other hand, it is manifest in a wholesome discrimination against formalism, legalism, and traditional superstitions. The essential quality of religion is always moral. The secret of the Lord is ever with the righteous.

This becomes a controlling principle of modern theology, so that we may justly speak of the moralizing of theology as the supreme task of the reconstruction. Religion is pre-eminently a matter of ethics and not of etiquette. Theological construction must be controlled by moral earnestness and moral insight. The characteristic emphasis of modern theology is the application of the moral test to all doctrinal formulations. Spiritual authority involves moral consistency.

Seventhly,—Christian theology interprets the type of spiritual life and experience which Jesus Christ created and of which he is the supreme revelation and standard. Christian theology, therefore, is the type of religious interpretation which always

comes back to the spirit of Jesus Christ for its final test.<sup>11</sup> It stands or falls with the test of the spiritual ideal which he incarnated in his character and conduct. And we must come back again and again to the concrete historical Jesus and his gospel to measure and test the spirit of the living Christ whose guidance within us is our supreme wisdom.

Eighthly,—to summarize our point of view, the task of Christian theology is to learn the Christian gospel of the spiritual life in the fullest and clearest way in which it has been revealed—in Jesus Christ, and in all experience and history as the context of Jesus and his gospel—and then to find the vehicle for the expression of thought which shall commend that message to living men today.

This involves the sympathetic study of the consciousness of our own time. For a vital and true theology must so translate the Christian truth into the living thought of today that it will grip men's convictions, persuade their reason, and compel their affections. The best theology is that which, while conveying the spiritual message of Jesus Christ, sympathetically interprets what is true in all great historic forms of doctrine, and translates this truth into a language that shall command the moral reason of the men who live today and judge them and win them. For the practical aim of Christian theology is to bring to living men Jesus' sense of a living message from the Living God.

<sup>11</sup> This language will seem too indefinite to some readers. We desire here only to make Jesus Christ the supreme test and principle of Christian theology, without entering the field of christological theory. The acceptance of this canon of criticism is consistent with a great variety of conceptions of Jesus and his work.